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ABSTRACT

The notional-functional or communicative approach to foreign language teaching as practiced in East Germany is described. The purpose of communicative foreign language teaching is to prepare the learner to communicate in real-life situations. Classroom and real-life situations differ in several respects, most notably in communicative intention. The intention in real-life situations depends on individual needs and interests, while the intention in classroom situations depends on the didactic aims of the course. While foreign language classes should be as lifelike as possible, the ability to create lifelike situations is limited by objective and subjective factors. Realism in foreign language teaching means taking account of the reality of classroom limitations. The extent to which reality is involved in each phase of foreign language learning is detailed. Seven phases are identified including imparting basic information to students, repetition of information so that students can internalize it, and additional practice to develop automatic use of discourse elements. These consecutive phases are necessary for effective language learning. (RW)

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Communicative Intention and Language Proficiency in a 'Real-Life' and Second Language Teaching Situation

Lothar Pohl
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The changes taking place in foreign language teaching theory and practice are mainly due to the fact that 'traditional' methods (such as audio-lingual, audio-visual, pattern-practice, situational teaching) have not rendered the results that correspond to learner's wants and needs and society's expectations.

A new attempt to solve the discrepancy between social and individual needs on the one hand and the attainments achieved on the other is made in a notional-functional approch [1] or a communicative approach [2]. Though these two approaches are not identical, they have many elements in common. They are realistic in so far as they take into account the language needs of society [3] or social groups [4]. They analyze the topics discussed in 'real-life' situations, the language activities to be encountered, the language functions to be fulfilled, the general and specific notions to be used and talked about as well as the language means used. From this analysis those topics, language activities, functions, notions and language items are derived and decided upon, which have to be used or taught in a given course in FLT.

Communicative FLT - as conceived and practised in the GDR - is to prepare the learner to cope with needs he will encounter in future real-life situations.
The communicative approach - based on the findings of psychology and linguistics [5] - considers language learning as an active aquisition of language means in communicative ('real-life') situations. The more reality there is in the learning situations the better will be the result in coping with future FL situations.

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In how far is it possible to make teaching life-like? In how far can FLT really prepare a person to cope with situations in future life?

Let us find out in how far class-room situations and real-life situations are alike and in how far they differ.

In 'real-life' situations one or more partners communicate ideas, intentions and express attitudes. The setting in which the communication takes place may be anywhere: at home, at work, in a restaurant, in an office etc. The setting may have an influence on the content of the communication, very often it is irrelevant to the topic discussed. The topic can vary according to (widely differing) intentions of the communicative partners. The role played in the setting depends on the personal relationship between the communicative partners (parents-children, children-children, guest-waitress, worker-engineer/ head of department etc.). The intention is to inform, express attitudes, receive or demand information. The register used is in accordance with the subject matter (topic) under discussion, the language functions to be expressed (requesting, denying etc.) and the notions to be expressed (economy, sports, social condition of workers, etc.) all depend on the intention or attitude of the communicative partners. Style and language means again correspond to or are made to correspond to the complex situation.

The FLL situation differs in many respects from the 'real-life' situation. Its function is to acquire competence or proficiency in the foreign language.
The number and variety of communicative partners is very much limited to teacher and (co-)student, the setting is mostly determined by the classroom in which 'real-life' situations can usually only be imaginary, acted or played. The range of topics is restricted and to a large extent limited by the decisions taken and aims and content laid down in the syllabus, as well as the texts and exercises in the textbook, and only

to a certain extent by the student's or teacher's immediate interest. The roles to be played by the learner are limited unless imaginary partners of different social standing are to be acted. The intention (according to the function) is determined by the didactic purpose and only to a certain degree determined by personal needs. Register, language function, style and language means used are again very much limited and subject to the didactic progression and didactic situation as a whole.

The most striking difference between the two situations - at least with respect to FLT at school - is in my opinion the communicative intention. The intention in real-life situations depends upon the interests and needs of the communicative partners: there is a lack of information on the one hand and the ability, the official task or personal intention to supply the information wanted (or even unwanted) on the other hand.

The intention in the FLL situation depends upon the didactic aim of the teacher or the materials used, the language means to be taught and the topics to be discussed. The communicative intention of the student is widely determined by the aim to acquire, or progress in, language proficiency, to meet the teaching/learning situation, in short by desires which are didactically orientated and guided.

There is no denying the fact that FL classes ought to be as life-like as possible and that FLT ought to prepare for reality in future life-situations. FL classes ought to make students understand that the language they learn is capable of transmitting messages, intentions and feelings, in the classroom and are not merely determined by grammatical progression.

But under general classroom conditions, as is the case in FLT in the GDR, there are both objective and subjective factors that limit the possibility to create life-like situations.

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What are such objective factors?

- Under general classroom conditions there is no selection of students, such as streaming.
- Thus students of varying mental abilities are grouped together from the age of 11 - 16 (classes 5 to 10), when learning the first foreign language and from 13 - 16 (classes 7 to 10) when learning the second foreign language.
- The general aim is to teach the fundamentals of a FL in the four skills as an element of a broad general education (including polytechnical education) which gives the student a chance to find his or her special interests in a field which is of use to society, and which will garantuee a job. Preparing for employment is thus not left to the student or his or her parents alone but is discussed - and decided - in accordance with social needs.
- The number of students per group ranges between 15 and 30.
- The number of periods per week is limited to about 3.
- FLT takes place in a surroundings where the mother tongue is generally used as a means of communication.
- In order to guarantuee equal chances to all children whether in towns, cities or villages the same materials are provided for every teacher: the TV-Course 'English for you' which must be used in all classes in the first and second year of ELT [6] - consisting of 57 broadcasts of 25 minutes each, slides to illustrate situations in the lessons, tapes, slide-and-tape series, cut-out cardboard figures to be used with the magnetic board in the beginners' classes and a series of broadcasts registered on tapes in the third year.

As subjective factors have to be considered:

- The diversity of interests: There are students who

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do not consider foreign language competence to be an essential prerogative for their future lives, especially if the teacher is not able to continually arouse the students' interest.

- The motivation, therefore, is not immediate but mediated by the teacher, his personality and his expertise, to a large extent by the TV-course, and other teaching materials which the teacher is supposed to use.
- A widely varying learning ability and creativity, which necessitates a differing degree of support for each student or group of learners. It also necessitates a varying amount of time to be devoted to formal repetition and skill formation.

"Realism" under such conditions means, being realistic about what can be done and what must be done in order for each student to achieve the best possible results. "Reality" as it exists in out-of-school FL situations is one of the elements for determining the aims, selecting the topics, functions, roles and registers as well as the lexical and grammatical items to be taught.
Such a reality - even if reduced to typical standard situations - cannot be fully created in the classroom context.

Using the FL, applying what the students have learnt is only to a limited extent possible in realistic ('life-like') situations. This means that the communicative intention of the students in such artificial situations is only to a certain extent realistic, wanting to inform the teacher or co-students about something essential to them. The discourse the student produces, depends first and foremost on his or her ability to reproduce a text or to build up a communicative intention, a situational plan for himself or herself, on the basis of his or her communicative or rather foreign language proficiency.

Given a certain degree of foreign language proficiency it is not enough to set a task and make the students develop their own plan. Some will arrive at rather good results, the

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results of others will be poorer. This is often not the result of insufficient language proficiency but because of the lack of a clear intention, of a discourse plan. In order to achieve better results, a better progress in language proficiency, it often proves necessary to help the student find and organize his or her communicative intention. In such a case the student will be able to concentrate more on the language means to be used in order to formulate the intention adequately, meet the requirements of the situation, the setting, the role, the function, the expectations of the teacher.

"Realism" in FLT means taking account of the 'reality' of the classroom, the teaching and learning situation; it ought to be as near to real life as possible, but the didactic purpose must never be abandoned or left out of sight.

Let me demonstrate to what extent and how 'reality' is involved in FLT under general learning conditions in the classroom. I am going to reduce the process of learning in a lesson to seven elements - which to a certain extent are consecutive steps, or phases.

(1) In a first phase or step students get the information they need in order
- to grasp the setting (as far as it is relevant for the topic to be discussed, this includes the 'carrier content' [7]),
- to be informed about the topic to be discussed,
- to understand the role the partners have to play (as far as it is of importance for the selection of the language means),
- to grasp the register and language function to be expressed (very often self-evident and not necessarily to be explained),
- to learn new and use formerly acquired language means necessary to express the intentions to be conveyed in further steps. The framework of this introduction ought to be fixed on the blackbord [8].

(2) The second phase or element is necessary for the students to interiorize the information, both with respect to content (if valuable, and not only 'carrier content') and the language items. This means repetition of discourse elements and lexical units (often partially combined with step one).

(3) A third phase is necessary in order to develop the necessary automatic use of discourse elements (again often combined with steps one and two). The action is to a large extent guided by framework and/or visual aids.
The structure of the discourse and the language means to express the intentions to be communicated are closely combined and internalized in simple discourse elements.

(4) A fourth element or phase has to prepare a language activity that is less teacher- and model-guided but gives more scope to the students to apply the language proficiency they have acquired so far. This means systematic repetition of language means in relation with a new topic and the introduction to the intended discourse structure.

(5) In a fifth phase the students prove how far their language proficiency is developed in applying their language proficiency in order to fulfil a given communicative intention differing (to a greater or lesser degree) from the situation learned in the first phase.
In this phase reality has to play a decisive part. The student is supposed to use his language means in order to convey some intention of his own. If this aim cannot be achieved without the teacher's aid he must give support in showing him how to plan the discourse and what to say or write. This support may be some visual aid or a word framework in the mother tongue in order to make the student concentrate on finding the language means appropriate to formulate the intention to be expressed [8].

(6) Assessing and correcting the results.

(7) Doing exercises to reinforce the students' knowledge and skills.

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Summary

'Life-Reality' is so complex that no learning experience will ever be able to cover all possible situations. FLT can only prepare for abstract standard situations - which appear sterile if transferred into reality. But human thinking is so organized as to adapt itself to changing conditions. What students need in order to meet the demands of a given situation is not an elaborated discourse in a situation well played but elements which they can use and select according to the strategy they have to follow in a future real-life situation, the intention they have to or want to express and bring home to the listener/reader, the communicative partner.

The language lessons have to provide those elements necessary to voice the students' intentions if demanded in didactic life-like situations which arouse the students' interests as much as possible.

I am not advocating something totally new:
rather I am trying to draw attention to the fact that we must remain realistic about what we can do under ordinary classroom conditions and what must be done in order to make the learning process as effective as possible for every student. Very often the teacher will have to provide the intention for the student or at least help him or her find or construct a realistic discourse plan. This allows the student to concentrate on the language means and will give more satisfaction if the result corresponds to the teachers' expectations.

To achieve this end certain didactic steps are required and recommended with respect to ELT in the GDR.

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1) cf. D.A.WILKINS: Notional Syllabuses. A taxonomy and its relevance to foreign language curriculum development. London: Oxford University Press 1976.

2) cf. L.POHL/G.SCHLECHT/S.UTHESS: Methodik Englisch- und Französischunterricht. Berlin: Volk und Wissen Volkseigener Verlag 1978.

3) ibid., pp. 13 f.

4) cf. J. van EK: The Unit/Credit System as a Possible Link between Various Forms of Teaching. In: language learning. Brussels: Didier 1978, pp. 27 - 39.

5) cf. A.A.LEONT'EV: Psychologistische Einheiten und die Erzeugung sprachlicher Äußerungen. Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1975.
and W.HARTUNG; et al.: Sprachliche Kommunikation und Gesellschaft. Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1974.

6) cf. L.POHL: English Language Teaching by Television in the German Democratic Republic. In: Modern Linguistics and Language Teaching. International Conference T.I.T. - F.I.P.L.V. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó 1975, pp. 425 - 427.

7) cf. R.L.ALLWRIGHT: What do we want teaching materials for? In: English Language Teaching. 36 (Oct. 1981) 1, pp. 5 - 18.

8) This task is fulfilled by the TV-course in the first two years in GDR-ELT, in the following two years it is the teacher who has to do this job. The less he lets himself be guided by the textbook and the more he makes this introduction part of a 'realistic' situation (certainly didactically guided, but not formal) the more the students will be interested, the more the lesson will lose its formal language learning character.

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"... in the final analysis the finished textbook is a rough and ready instrument, and it can never take away from the teacher the task of finely tuning the total learning process of his pupils, because only he has the empirical feedback of a particular class. "

W.BUTZKAMM/C.J.DODSON: The Teaching of Communication. From Theory to Practice. IRAL 18 (1981), p. 304.

9) cf. L.POHL: Vorbereitung und Durchführung von Leistungskontrollen im dialogischen Sprechen.

In: Fremdsprachenunterricht 25 (1981) 10,pp. 486 - 493.

and H.G.WIDDOWSON: Directions in the Teaching of Discourse. In: C.J.BRUMFIT/H.JOHNSON (Eds.): The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching. Oxford University Press 1979, p. 71:

"... the process of learning a foreign language should be presented not as the acquisition of new knowledge and experience but as an extension or alternative realization of what the learner already knows."